

# Unusual uses of pewter

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## Pewter for counterfeit coins

### The Crime Museum Uncovered

The Museum of London has recently opened a new special exhibition. Entitled 'The Crime Museum Uncovered', it displays selected items from the Police 'Black Museum'. The exhibition treads a careful, and in my view, successful, line between ghoulishness and information.

But in between the many murder weapons, the hangman's ropes, and the sad stories of murder and attempted murder, there is a display case about the counterfeiting of coins. The legend, taken from Ernest Carr's description in *Living London*, describes the counterfeiting process - the tools used for producing counterfeit coins included: a ceramic melting pot, an iron ladle, moulds and a good, preferably worn, coin from which to obtain the impression.

A mould was created from the impression, and molten metal was poured into it. Once free of the mould, the 'coin' had its edges milled with a knife, was 'silvered' in a battery, burnished with a scratch brush, polished with lampblack and grease, and then washed. This process went largely unchanged throughout the 20th century.

However, while in the 19th century, coiners used iron and brass, towards its end, they turned to pewter, often melted down from mugs stolen from pubs, for their coins!

The co-curator of the exhibition, Jackie Keily, referred me to a further reference, in 'The Bye-ways of Crime', by R. J. Power-Berrey (1899), in which he refers to pewter pots being stolen from public-houses and then being melted down to make coins:



Counterfeiter's crucible



Counterfeiter's ladle

'The pewter is obtained by stealing pots from public-houses, so that the victualler, a favourite 'mark' of the criminal, is had in two ways. He first loses his pots, and then gets them back a bit at a time in the shape of bad half-crowns.' (p. 102-3).

Power-Berry also mentions that pewter gives 'the best foundation for base coins' (p.102).

Illustrated here from the exhibition, courtesy of the Museum of London/the Police Museum: a counterfeiter's ladle (above, left) and a crucible (above, right), seized by the police. The ladle was usually iron, the crucible, ceramic.

## Alan Williams

There is at least one other pewter item in the displays, so let me encourage you to go along to see this fascinating exhibition. Ed.

Photos: © Museum of London/Courtesy the Metropolitan Police's Crime Museum

The Museum of London:  
<http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/london-wall/whats-on/exhibitions-displays/>

The Crime Museum Uncovered: Open until 10 April 2016

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